

How to Most Effectively Address the Statement of the Research Problem (Chapter 1)

The **Statement of the Research Problem** should answer three core questions:

1. **What is the problem?**
2. **Who is affected, and in what context?**
3. **Why does this problem matter for practice and decision-making?**

It should be **clear, concise, actionable**, and directly linked to the **purpose statement** and **research questions**.

★ A High-Quality Applied Research Problem Statement Includes:

1. A Clear Problem Gap

State what is *not working, insufficient, unknown, or in need of improvement* in a real organizational or educational setting.

Examples of “problem gaps”:

- A practice gap (e.g., ineffective intervention, inconsistent implementation)
- A performance gap (e.g., low retention, declining outcomes)
- A knowledge gap (e.g., leaders lack data to make decisions)
- A systems gap (e.g., lack of processes, policies, or training)

Avoid: vague social problems, broad societal issues, or problems outside your scope to investigate or influence.

2. Context + Affected Stakeholders

Applied research must clearly identify:

- The **organization, school, district, department, or system** where the problem exists.
- The **specific group** affected (students, staff, faculty, customers, etc.).

This establishes *relevance* and makes the research practical.

3. Evidence That the Problem Is Real

Use **organizational data, reports, policies, or scholarly literature** to show the problem actually exists.

Evidence may include:

- Declining performance metrics
- Inconsistent adoption of new processes
- Survey or evaluation results
- Inequities in outcomes
- Lack of training or resources
- Gaps between expected vs. actual performance

This is NOT the full literature review—just enough evidence to validate the problem.

4. Consequences of Not Addressing the Problem

Briefly explain:

- What happens if nothing changes?
- How does the problem limit effectiveness, equity, productivity, learning, or outcomes?

This ties the problem to its **practical significance**.

5. What Is Needed (without stating the solution yet)

Describe what is needed to address the problem *in general terms*, not the exact intervention.

Examples:

- Need to understand factors influencing X
- Need to explore stakeholder perceptions of Y
- Need data to guide decision-making about Z

This sets up the **purpose statement** that follows.

★ Recommended Paragraph Structure (4–6 paragraphs)

Paragraph 1: Introduce the problem in its organizational context.

Identify the setting and stakeholders and clearly state the central problem.

Paragraph 2: Provide evidence the problem exists.

Use organizational data or literature to show why this problem is real and important.

Paragraph 3: Show the consequences of the problem.

Explain the negative impact on outcomes, efficiency, satisfaction, performance, or equity.

Paragraph 4: Identify what is unknown or not yet understood.

This is the research gap—what leaders need to know but currently do not.

Paragraph 5 (optional): Connect to the need for applied research.

Clarify how your study will help leaders make decisions or improve practice.

★ Template for an Applied Research Problem Statement

Despite ongoing efforts to **[improve/update/implement]**, **[organization/setting]** continues to experience **[specific, measurable problem]** among **[stakeholder group]**. Recent organizational data indicate that **[evidence of the problem]**, suggesting that current practices are insufficient to achieve desired outcomes.

This problem has resulted in **[consequences: reduced performance, inequitable outcomes, inefficiencies, dissatisfaction, compliance issues, etc.]**, which limits the organization's ability to **[meet goals/standards/strategic priorities]**.

Although **[organization]** has implemented **[relevant strategies or initiatives]**, it remains unclear which **[factors, perceptions, barriers, conditions]** are influencing **[problem outcome]**. Leaders currently lack actionable information needed to make informed decisions about how to improve **[area of practice]**.

Without a deeper understanding of **[specific unknowns]**, the organization cannot effectively address **[problem]** or improve outcomes for **[stakeholders]**. Therefore, research is needed to examine **[what must be understood to solve the problem]**, which will support evidence-based decision-making within **[organization]**.

★ Example (Fictitious)

Despite implementing a new digital learning platform, **Westview High School** continues to experience **low engagement and inconsistent usage among 10th-grade students**, particularly those enrolled in mathematics support courses. District usage reports show that only **32% of students log in more than once per week**, despite expectations of daily use.

This limited engagement reduces opportunities for individualized practice and is associated with **persistent achievement gaps**, as students who rarely use the platform demonstrate significantly lower assessment scores. Teachers report insufficient data to differentiate instruction effectively.

Although professional development and technical support have been provided, it is unclear which **student, teacher, or system-level factors** are influencing usage patterns. The school lacks actionable information needed to increase student engagement with the digital tool.

Research is needed to understand the barriers and facilitators of platform use in order to guide school leaders in improving implementation and supporting equitable access to personalized learning resources.

★ Common Mistakes to Avoid

- ✗ Overly broad social problems (“Poverty is a problem...”)
- ✗ No organizational context
- ✗ No evidence the problem exists
- ✗ Problem stated as the absence of a solution (“We don’t have a program...”)
- ✗ Turning the problem statement into the purpose statement
- ✗ Describing the intervention before diagnosing the problem